



*Columbia County Local Work Group Meeting
February 25, 2021 Virtual Zoom Meeting*

MINUTES

The meeting was called to order by Cory Owens at 10:00 a.m. Those in attendance were:

Cory welcomed everyone to the meeting and stated that the purpose of this meeting is to provide a forum for partners, farmers, ranchers, foresters, and conservation groups to share conservation activities and discuss natural resource problems that should be prioritized. The group assists in guiding NRCS where to use farm bill funds for technical and financial assistance in the future. Cory stated our appreciation of everyone in attendance for coming and volunteering their time to participate. We (NRCS) have the ability to target specific resource issues that are important to the county.

Jessica announced the retirement of Don Mehlhoff after 38 years of service. Thank you, Don, for all the work you contributed to further conservation in Columbia County and build strong partnerships.

Jessica presented a PowerPoint presentation explaining the Local Work Group process, our current Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS's), Farm Bill Programs, and showcased conservation practices that have been implemented throughout the county through various NRCS Programs.

The Annual Local Work Group meetings are required by NRCS policy as a way to obtain local input on ways to make Farm Bill programs work locally, assist with establishing local resource priorities, and identify practices needed to address resource concerns in the county. Although we meet only once each year, comments or suggestions are always welcome throughout the year. Feel free to call or email any time.

Partnerships make things happen!

Janelle Huserik, FSA County Executive Director - covering several counties, including Columbia for now. www.farmers.gov is a great resource to find information about the many USDA programs. Disaster Recovery Tool can assist you to find which program you might be eligible for. On the FSA website, FSAParm+ is software you can sign up for that will allow you to access your FSA records. Also on the site is a Programs and Services link that explains all the eligibility requirements for working with FSA. Feel free to contact FSA if you have any questions.

Malcolm asked if a landowner has recently replanted an area, and the young trees were burned in the wildfire and had not yet reached the 'free to grow' requirement, is the landowner eligible for assistance to replant again under the emergency disaster program? Under the EFRP program, producers would be eligible to participate under that scenario.

Jessica introduced all the new faces in NRCS for Columbia County and had each one provide some background info:

Stacey Cooper – Small Farms and Organic Specialist. Arrived in St. Helens office mid-November. She will cover both the North Coast and Lower Willamette basins. Background in vegetable production, organic operations. Assisting customers with high tunnels, cover crops, mulching, pollinators, hedgerows, and many other practices.

Corin Pease – Xerces Society partnering with NRCS, located in Hillsboro field office. Contract position with NRCS to assist with pollinator habitat projects. Background in IPM, insects and pollinators, crop consultant working in berry fields. Available to work with landowners to assist with pollinator seed mixes, hedgerow plantings, plantings, cover crops, etc. Feel free to contact Corin if you are interested in obtaining assistance. Corin.pease@xerces.org

Question if Corin is available to assist non-landowners with pollinator questions. Yes, feel free to contact Corin and he'll see how he can assist, but main focus is on working lands.

Hannah Isaacs – NRCS, NEW DC for Columbia County! Welcome Hannah! Hannah is currently a Soil Conservationist in the Tillamook office. She will start as the new DC in St. Helens on March 29. Background in restoration and watershed management, Cultural Resource conservation. Started with NRCS in Montana in 2015. Moved to Tillamook in 2018.

Jessica Wells – NRCS, DC in Washington County, Hillsboro Office. Jess is filling in for Don after his retirement until Hannah arrives at the end of March.

Farm Bill Programs in Columbia County include EQIP, CStP, CRP/CREP, RCPP, and WRE.

EQIP - Environmental Quality Incentives Program -

- Purpose – To solve priority natural resource problems on agricultural lands such as soil, water, wildlife, and related resource issues.
 - Assist farmers, ranchers, and forest owners in complying with federal, state, and local regulations
 - Encourage environmental enhancements
 - NRCS's bread and butter conservation program. Most flexibility to address local resource needs on a county level
 - Past 12 years, 248 contracts have been funded, 28 active contracts currently
- Current EQIP Conservation Implementation Strategies in Columbia County:

- NC/LW Basin Forest Diversity – year 2 of 2. This covers 4 watersheds in the South Scappoose & Milton Creek watersheds
- Columbia Corridor Soil Health – Year 3 of 5
- Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery – Year 3 of 5
- Organic Initiative – National initiative where applications are ranked for a state-wide pool of funds rather than a local pool of funds
- Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative – National initiative where applications are ranked for a state-wide pool of funds rather than a local pool of funds
- Energy Initiative - National initiative where applications are ranked for a state-wide pool of funds rather than a local pool of funds
- Animal Feeding Operation – State initiative with basin funding pools

CStP – Conservation Stewardship Program

- Annual payment for conservation - 5-year contract
- Includes both crop land and forest land
- We have had 25 contracts in last 10 years, all but one are completed
- Designed for operations that are already functioning at a higher level of conservation and are willing to adopt enhancement activities that make additional improvements

CRP/CREP – Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (administered by FSA)

- We have 7 contracts that cover 305 acres of riparian forest buffers
- All located in the Mist/Birkenfeld area
- 10-15 year rental agreements that pay an annual payment to maintain riparian areas

ACEP – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- ALE – Agriculture Land Easement
NRCS purchases easements on land used for agriculture to reduce conversion of those lands to non-Ag uses
 - No current ALE easements in the county
- WRE – Wetland Reserve Easement
Previously known as WRP. NRCS purchases easement on ag land to restore wetlands. We have 3 permanent easements in Columbia County that covers approximately 480 acres.

RCPP – Regional Conservation Partnership Program

- Lower Columbia Watershed Partnership
 - New in 2017 – Grant from NRCS to Columbia SWCD

- Uses watershed authority to implement practices that address water quality and fish and wildlife habitat in the Clatskanie – Rainier regions of the county. NRCS funds are combined with matching funds from the SWCD and other partnering agencies. 2021 will be the first year of implementation
- Project/Plan EA has been completed and submitted to DC

Jessica showed several pictures of successful conservation projects in the county including high tunnels installed, cover crops, grass seeding, and rainwater harvest collection tanks.

Summary of Program interest in Columbia County for 2020:

2020 – Received 22 applications - Funded 17 for a total of \$261,181

- 2 – High Tunnel Initiative
- 3 - Columbia Corridor Soil Health
- 10 – Forest Diversity
- 1 - Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery
- 1 - Animal Feeding Operations

Completed Practices in 2020:

- 1 Forest Management Plan
- 2 High Tunnels with Cover Crops
- 15.7 acres Brush Management
- 5 ac. Weed Treatment
- 24.5 ac Slash Treatment
- 7.2 ac Tree Planting
- 343 ac Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 124 ac Forest Stand Improvement (pre-commercial thinning on 10 farms)
- 160 ft Hedgerow
- 340 ft Irrigation Pipeline
- 2 Pumps
- 23 ac Pasture and Hay plantings
- 3 Roof Runoff Structures (gutters/tanks)

2021 – Received 13 applications to date

- 2 – High Tunnel Initiative
- 7 - Columbia Corridor Soil Health
- 3 – Forest Diversity
- 1 - Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery
- 1 - Animal Feeding Operations

Cutoff date for submitting applications for 2021 EQIP funding is April 16, 2021.

Current EQIP CIS's -

Forest Diversity: Year 2 of 2. Improve the structure and composition of young monoculture, even-aged forest stands with closed canopies, trying to take these stands to the next levels – understory vegetation and mixed age stands. Jessica showed a map of the Forest Diversity CIS Area, and a list of practices. This area for Forest Diversity CIS covers 4 watersheds in the South Scappoose and Milton Creek area. This CIS is nearly identical to our previous Forest Diversity CIS, just different targeted watersheds. Our county is approximately 75% forest land, so it is crucial to continue to provide assistance to our private forest land operators. This is a Basin-Wide CIS that we joined in the middle of its lifespan. This CIS is ending this year, but a new strategy is being produced that will begin in 2022.

Columbia Corridor Soil Health: Year 3 of 5. Goal is to improve soil health of the Columbia River Corridor farmlands through management improvements on pasture and cropland and encourage improvements to water quality and fish habitat to assist with salmon recovery. Practices include fencing, cover crop, high tunnel, conservation cover, crop rotations, pollinator habitat, hedgerows, heavy use protection, forage planting, tree planting, mulching, brush management, weed control, rotational grazing. Very good interest with more people enquiring all the time. Main resource concerns being addressed are soil health and water quality. Targeting small market garden producers and livestock operators.

Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery: Year 3 of 5. Goal is to improve soil health of the Nehalem Valley grasslands through management improvements on pasture and hayland and encourage improvements to the riparian areas along the Nehalem River and its tributaries to assist with Coastal Coho salmon recovery. Practices include fence, forage biomass planting, prescribed grazing, trough, herbaceous weed control, obstruction removal, brush management, mulching, tree/shrub site prep and planting, early successional habitat management. Targeted resource issues are productivity, low level of management, invasive weeds, compaction, low production species, fish and wildlife habitat (elk, coho salmon). Very little outreach has been done due to lack of technical staff to develop and administer contracts. We plan on doing outreach this year.

In addition to all our programs, Stacey has been working in partnership with Dana Pricher and the SBWC on 3 properties along Raymond Creek to assist with erosion control, stream restoration, fencing riparian area, plantings for streambank stabilization, and stream crossings. This will be an ongoing project.

Setting priorities for Columbia County Resource Concerns for 2022 and beyond –

2022 Fuels Reduction and Forest Health – new basin-wide CIS that will begin in 2022. Kim Gray, Basin Resource Conservationist is developing this CIS and will request input from each county on focus area, needed practices, and goals for acres treated. Focus will

be on fuels reduction, mainly precommercial thinning, brush management, access roads, etc.

Malcom mentioned fuels reduction around communities can be tricky because of the effects on air quality. Can NRCS assist with chipping rather than burning? Most of Columbia County is within ODF protection boundary, burning is allowed. Kim mentioned that it could be considered as a component under woody residue treatment.

John Krause stated that Greg Pellham, a local logger in St. Helens, recently purchased a forest chipper. Slash piles can also be burned, but chipping is another option. Contact John for more information. Greg is available 'for hire' if anyone is interested in the chipping option.

Current Top Priorities in Columbia County in Order of Importance/Priority:

Degraded Plant Condition – Forestland (CIS in place)

Inadequate Habitat – Grassland/Cropland for CWTD (CIS completed 2019)

Degraded Plant Condition – Forestland Wildfire Hazard with Urban Interface

Water Quality – Forestland/Private Roads Excessive Sediment in Surface Water

Water Quality Degradation – HQ – Excess Nutrient and Organics in Surface and Ground Water from Small Animal Feeding Operations (New CIS in Place)

Potential New Priorities:

- Temperature and fecal coliform bacteria are two water quality factors most commonly exceeded.

What is the Best Way to get the Word Out for Outreach?

Dana stated that they did outreach for the Raymond creek project with online zoom meetings, mailings, and individual landowner site visits.

Danielle mentioned newsletters, mailings and small workshops are all great.

Malcolm - email works great

Amber – good success with postcards. Jake Constans agreed.

Partner and Landowner Discussions

Amy Darr, ODFW – North Willamette Watershed District now has an east and west side. Becky Fuda is the new District Wildlife Biologist on the west side of the district, which includes most of Columbia County. Kurt Licence is the Wildlife Biologist for the east

side. New District Fish Biologist for the east half of our county is Peter Stevens, located in Clackamas, while Robert Bradley covers the Southwest (Nehalem Valley) portion of Columbia County. A lot of new faces in the agency and vacancies waiting to be filled.

Dan Cary, ODSL – covers Tillamook, Clatsop, and Columbia counties. Oversees fill/removal permits. Located out of St. Helens right now during Covid. Happy to assist with permit planning or answer any questions. 503-986-5302. Dan asked if NRCS has funding and engineering assistance available to help with streambank erosion? Yes, depending on location. Have the landowner reach out to the local NRCS office to see if assistance is available in their location and we will see which of our programs might fit the project needs. Must be on working lands. Watershed Councils and SWCD's can also assist with writing grants to obtain funds for restoration on non-working lands, however, it is a long process.

York Johnson, DEQ - is the NCB Coordinator. Happy to assist with water quality monitoring and water quality issues. Feel free to contact York with questions.

Hannah Isaacs – available on a limited basis until she officially starts her new position as DC and can be reached at 503-457-9021 or Hannah.isaacs@usda.gov if you want to discuss one-on-one.

Ron Davidson – landowner in Warren. Would be nice if NRCS could coordinate a Small Farm Tour so landowners/producers can network with each other and see how others are operating, especially in the Columbia Corridor Soil Health CIS Area.

Casey Garrett – Columbia County Commissioner. Available to assist anywhere he can, eager to learn our programs and begin networking. 503-396-1944

Hannah – encouraged partners, when working on different projects, try to think about where you see NRCS fitting in to assist, feel free to reach out to partner.

Cory Owens is our NRCS State Soil Scientist and is also available for all things 'soil health'. Can provide soil health demonstrations, presentations, etc.

Meeting adjourned at 11:20
Dee Robinson